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Update on the Demography of Rural Disability Part Two: Non-Metropolitan and Metropolitan

Based on our research, only 35 U.S. counties have no rural people with disabilities, and almost half of rural Americans with disabilities live in metropolitan counties.

Why Does This Matter to Rural Americans with Disabilities?

Resource distribution and access to services are affected by how people and counties are counted and classified. “Non-metropolitan” counties are frequently treated as being synonymous with “rural”; and if a county is designated as “metropolitan”, all territory or people within it are also presumed to be metropolitan. In reality however, *many rural areas are located within metropolitan counties*. Data from Census 2000 showed that for the first time over half of all rural Americans live in counties designated as metropolitan.

Nationally, 2,052 non-metropolitan counties occupy 97 percent of U.S. land area, and are home to about one-fifth (almost 44.5 million) of the U.S. population. Approximately 22 percent (9.7 million) of these non-metropolitan Americans have a disability. Research shows that people with disabilities living in non-metropolitan counties experience social, health, economic, and educational disadvantages equal to or greater than their central city counterparts (Norton & McManus, 1989; Swanson, 1990). Non-metropolitan counties have the highest poverty rates (Rojewski, 1992; Nord, 1997). Of the 386 counties categorized as “persistent poverty” counties, 340 are non-metropolitan counties (USDA Economic Research Service, 2004).

Definitions

A **Metropolitan county** is a central county with (1) one or more urbanized areas each having a population of 50,000 or more residents, plus (2) any outlying counties in which at least 25 percent of the working age population commute to the central county for work or in which 25 percent of the outlying county’s workers commute from the central county - the so-called “reverse” commuting pattern.

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A **Non-metropolitan county** can be classified as either a “non-metropolitan, micropolitan” or “non-metropolitan, non-core” county. Non-metropolitan, micropolitan counties have one or more urban clusters (towns) of 10,000 to 49,999 persons. As with metropolitan counties, a micropolitan area can have one or more counties, and outlying counties are affected by commuting patterns. Non-metropolitan, non-core counties contain no town (urban cluster) of at least 10,000 people. .

Census 2000 collected disability information only from people aged five and older in the civilian, non-institutionalized population. Disability status was not asked of individuals in institutions or people in the Armed Forces. The percentage of people with disabilities is calculated by dividing the number of persons with a disability by the number of civilian, non-institutionalized persons aged five or older. Table 1 shows the population breakdown by metropolitan and non-metropolitan county designation. We know that many rural Americans actually live in metropolitan counties, so it’s also important to look at disability and county classifications from a rural perspective. Table 2 provides figures only for the rural population.

Table 1 shows 9,654,261 non-metropolitan people with disabilities. Table 2 shows 10,852,330 rural people with disabilities. This difference doesn’t seem very large, until you realize they are not the same 10-11 million people. Focusing rural attention only on non-metropolitan counties overlooks the almost half of rural Americans with disabilities who live in metropolitan counties. However the “rural” category does not include the 5 million people with disabilities in urban clusters - towns with 2,500 - 49,999 people.

Table 1. Disability Demographics for U.S. Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan Counties

	# of Counties	Total Population	Civilian, non-institutionalized persons 5 years & older		
			Total	# with a Disability	% with a Disability
United States Total	3,141	281,421,906	257,167,527	49,746,248	19.3%
County Classification (OMB, November 2004)					
Metropolitan	1,089	232,579,940	212,657,595	40,091,987	18.9%
Non-Metropolitan	2,052	48,841,966	44,509,932	9,654,261	21.7%
Micropolitan	692	29,477,802	26,843,971	5,625,928	21.0%
Non-core	1,360	19,364,164	17,665,961	4,028,333	22.8%

Note: American Fact Finder currently only has Census 2000 data available for Metropolitan Statistical Areas using the older *Census Glossary* definitions. For more information on the 1993-2003 changes in county metro and non-metro status.

Other approaches may better reflect where people live, and the implications that residence and population density have for service needs. For example, rural transportation planners do not include people living in non-metropolitan urban clusters as “urban”. Using transportation classifications, there are about 89 million residents living in rural transportation areas, 16.5 million of whom have a disability (i.e, they count all of the people in non-metropolitan counties, plus the rural people living in metropolitan counties.)

Table 2. Rural Disability Demographics

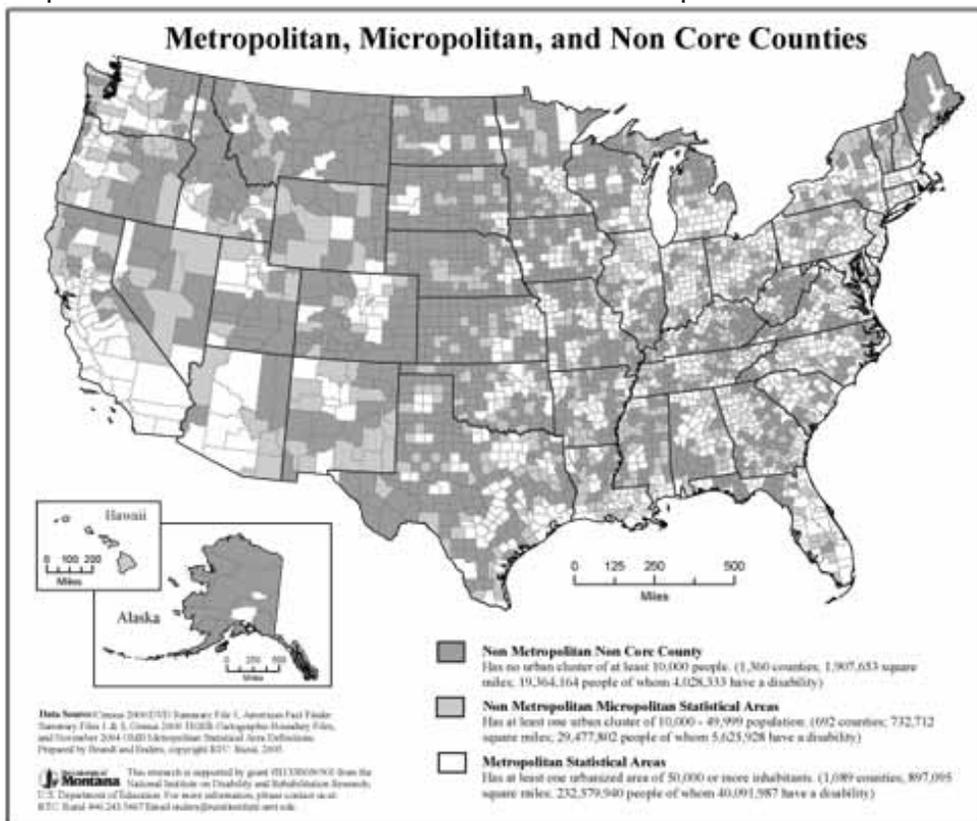
U.S. and County Designation	Total Rural Population	Rural, civilian, non-institutionalized persons 5 years and older		
		Total Rural Number	Number rural with a Disability	% with a Disability
United States	59,061,367	54,642,046	10,852,330	19.9%
Metropolitan	30,190,101	27,943,246	5,114,734	18.3%
Non-Metropolitan	28,871,266	26,698,620	5,737,596	21.5%
Non-Metropolitan, Micropolitan	14,265,957	13,222,016	2,702,097	20.4%
Non-Metropolitan, Non-Core	14,605,309	13,476,604	3,035,499	22.5%

Source: Census 2000, American Fact Finder, Summary File 1. Census 2000 DVD: Summary File 3.

So why are non-metropolitan counties still equated with rural, and metropolitan counties equated with non-rural? It's because a county is a basic governmental administrative unit and agencies responsible for counting, analyzing, or distributing resources typically rely on a county's metropolitan or non-metropolitan designation. A county perspective is also valuable because some federal data on county social and economic characteristics are updated at least annually. Data based on population density (i.e. rural) has only been available every ten years from the decennial Census.

Map 1 shows U.S. counties in metropolitan statistical areas; non-metropolitan, micropolitan statistical areas; and non-metropolitan, non-core areas. Nonmetropolitan Counties cover about 75% of the US land area.

Map 1. Rural America: Where Rural = Nonmetropolitan Counties



Non-metropolitan, non-core counties: Have no urban cluster of at least 10,000 people (1,360 counties; 1,907,653 square miles; 19,364,164 people of whom 4,028,333 have a disability).

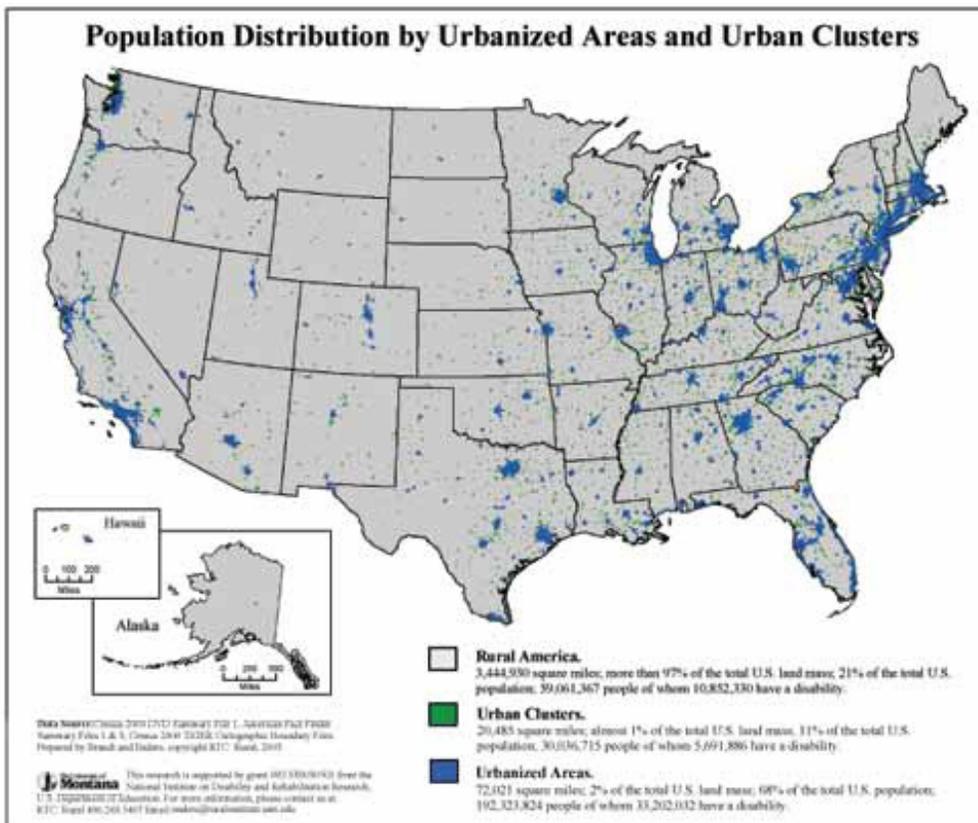
Non-metropolitan, micropolitan statistical area counties: Have at least one urban cluster of 10,000 to 49,999 people (692 counties; 732,712 square miles; 29,477,802 people of whom 5,625,928 have a disability).

Metropolitan statistical area counties: Have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more people (1,089 counties; 897,095 square miles; 232,579,940 people of whom 40,091,987 have a disability).

Map Data Source: American Factfinder Summary Files 1 & 3; Census 2000 TIGER Cartographic Boundary Files; Census 2000 DVD Summary File 1; OMB 11/2004 Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Definitions, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/metro>.

Map 2 shows the locations of urbanized areas (blue) and urban clusters (green). Rural areas are shown in gray and represent 97% of U.S. land mass. Urbanized areas and urban clusters make up the remaining 3%.

Map 2. Rural America, based on Population Density, covers 97% of the U.S. Landscape



Rural America: 3,444,930 square miles; more than 97% of the total U.S. land mass; 21% of the total U.S. population; 59,061,367 people of whom 10,852,330 have a disability.

Urban Clusters: 20,485 square miles; almost 1% of the total U.S. land mass; 11% of the total U.S. population; 30,036,715 people of whom 5,691,886 have a disability.

Urbanized Areas: 72,021 square miles; 2% of the total U.S. land mass; 68% of the total U.S. population; 192,323,824 people of whom 33,202,032 have a disability.

Map Data Source:American Fact Finder Summary Files 1 & 3. Census 2000 DVD Summary File 1, and 2000 TIGER Cartographic Boundary Files.

Disability: Census 2000 classified a person as having a disability if any of the following conditions were true: 1. A person aged five or older reported a long-lasting sensory, physical, mental or self-care disability; 2. A person aged 16 or older reported difficulty going outside the home because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more; or 3. A person aged 16 to 64 reported difficulty working at a job or business because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more. For more information, see Resources/References for Census Brief: Disability Status 2000.

Definitions Drive Resource Distribution

Currently several distinct, inconsistent rural definitions are applied by federal and state programs to establish rural funding eligibility. (Christman, 2004) For example, health care, housing, transportation, and telecommunications agencies all use different population thresholds and geographic boundaries to demonstrate rural status and determine program eligibility.

Funding tied to county designations can mask significant urban-rural disparities in population density and socioeconomic status. GAO (2004) suggests using density measures, rather than the MSA criterion in the statute, may better reflect where people live. As OMB states (below) “Programs that base funding levels or eligibility on whether a county is included in a Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area may not accurately address issues or problems faced by local populations, organizations, institutions, or governmental units.”

In contrast to OMB’s recommendations, programmatic funding is frequently targeted to only designated geographic areas, e.g. metropolitan, rural, frontier. Understanding how these areas are defined will help you understand the funding opportunities available to your local community and how to target rural resources.

Rurality has many different cut off points: 2,500 (upper limit for the Census definition of rural); 5,000 (exceptionally rural, upper limit, Rural Utilities Service); 10,000 (lower limit for an urban cluster to trigger a county to be micropolitan); 25,000 (Federal Communication Commission, upper limit, e-rate discounts); 50,000 (lower limit for an urbanized area to trigger a county to be metropolitan; also used as an upper limit for rural transportation, Federal Transit Administration); 200,000 (Housing and Urban Development, Community Development Block Grants (CDBG): lower limit for cities to apply for grants directly from the federal government, those under 200,000 must go through the State program).

Work is underway at the federal level to develop geographical area classifications more appropriate for programmatic resource allocation. While this may be complicated, if you think you live or work in Rural America, your ideas need to be included in future policy. Why? Because these geographic classifications drive the distribution of the dollars that make services, transportation, and communities accessible to all.

Why the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) says it matters:

...”Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas - collectively called Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) - should not serve as a general purpose geographic framework for nonstatistical activities and may or may not be suitable for use in program funding formulas. The Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Standards do not equate to an urban-rural classification; all counties included in Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas and many other counties contain both urban and rural territory and populations. Programs that base funding levels or eligibility on whether

a county is included in a Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area may not accurately address issues or problems faced by local populations, organizations, institutions, or governmental units. For instance, programs that seek to strengthen rural economies by focusing solely on counties located outside Metropolitan Statistical Areas could ignore a predominantly rural county that is included in a Metropolitan Statistical Area because a high percentage of the county's residents commute to urban centers for work. Although the inclusion of such a county in a Metropolitan Statistical Area indicates the existence of economic ties, as measured by commuting, with the central counties of the Metropolitan Statistical Area, it may also indicate a need to provide programs that would strengthen the county's rural economy so that workers are not compelled to leave the county in search of jobs...." Federal Register, Vol. 65, No. 249, pages 82228-82229, 12/27/2000.

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Additional Reading:

Ruralfacts: Update on the Demography of Rural Disability: Part One, Rural and Urban, 2005 PDF File

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